‘Netaji’s life was more important than the legends and myths’

Miami-based economist turned film-maker Suman Ghosh — who has also made a documentary on Amartya Sen — was in conversation with Sugata Bose. Netaji’s grandnephew, about the historian’s His Majesty’s Opponent — Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle Against Empire on the morning of the launch of the Penguin book. Metro sat in on the Netaji adda. Excerpts...

Suman Ghosh: You are a direct descendent of Subhas Chandra Bose and your father (Sisir Kumar Bose) was involved in the freedom struggle with him. Did you worry about objectivity in treating a subject that was so close to you?

Sugata Bose: I made a conscious decision to write this book as a historian. Not as a family member. My father always used to tell me that Netaji believed that his country and family were coterminous. So if I’m a member of the Bose family by an accident of birth so are all of the people of India. In some ways, if there is a problem of objectivity it would apply to most people and scholars of the subcontinent. But I felt I had acquired the necessary critical distance from my subject to embark on this project when I did.

Ghosh: Netaji has always been shrouded in myths and mysteries. He has primarily been characterised as a revolutionary and a warrior. This book introduced me to the visionary in Netaji. Any comments on that aspect?

Bose: First of all, my primary motivating factor in writing the book was that I genuinely came to believe that Netaji's life was more important than the legend and the myths and mysteries surrounding him and this was making the new generation forget about what he was like as a human being. Secondly, I think we have a very one-dimensional perspective on Netaji as a warrior hero, which he was, but there are many other important dimensions to his personality. As you rightly point out, he was a visionary, a thinker. I have used his letters extensively to reconstruct his life and thought. He was a person with a philosophical bent of mind, interested in questions of culture, history and poetry in a deep way. And at the helm of Indian national politics he provides something of a blueprint for the social and economic reconstruction of India once freedom came. He believed freedom would come and we have to plan for the future.

Ghosh: One thing you mention is Bose believed that after Indian independence an authoritarian rule was necessary for the social and economic transformation of India for a certain period of time, which I think would bother advocates of democracy. What are your thoughts on that?

Bose: I think we need to look at Subhas Chandra Bose’s corpus of writings and speeches as a whole. I have noted that at least on three separate occasions, the final one being in a speech given to the faculty and students of Tokyo University in 1944, he did suggest that in order to bring about radical egalitarian social and economic reforms some measure of a strong centre may be needed, where he used the term ‘authoritarian’, for a period of 10 or 20 years. However, I have found that whenever he said that, even in his earlier writings, and there are two other essays that I cite, he was constantly qualifying that by saying ‘as soon as the machinery of the central of state has been put into operation we will then make sure that we give genuine administrative, economic, cultural autonomy to the federating units’.

And if you look at some of his earlier writings and speeches, which are often not studied, for example he made a major speech in 1928 when he called for India to be a federal republic. So if our conception of democracy includes elements of genuine federalism then Subhas Chandra Bose was in fact a democrat and he kept insisting that democracy is not a western institution; it is a human institution. That we have certain values in our past which are conducive to us having a democratic system and with that he comes very close to Professor Amartya Sen who talks about the earlier history of public discussion in India, roots of Indian democracy and so forth.

Ghosh: An interesting aspect of the book is the relationship between Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose. Tagore was a continuous moral support and even wrote a letter on his behalf to Gandhi. There was a close affinity between them although Tagore was not in favour of the nation state as a political form...

Bose: Subhas Chandra Bose was a great admirer of Rabindranath Tagore from his childhood. I’ve sighted letters that he wrote even before Tagore won the Nobel prize. He said that foreigners really respect him and we are not giving him the honour due to him. Then they travelled back together in 1921 after Subhas Chandra Bose had resigned from...
the ICS. As you rightly note, they came closest in 1939 when Tagore wanted Bose to have a second term as Congress president and when he resigned Tagore said, ‘Your temporary defeat will turn into a permanent victory’. He was the first to describe Netaji as the ‘Deshonayak’. Tagore of course had a critical perspective on nationalism or certainly the nation state; he did not want Indians to imitate the territorial model of a European nation state.

My reading is that Subhas Chandra Bose may have been an uncompromising anti-imperialist but he was not an uncritical nationalist either…. So in terms of their thinking they may not have been that far apart but Bose was a political leader and activist in the nationalist movement. Tagore as a poet, philosopher could afford to be even more critical in his stance.

Ghosh: In the Indian National Congress the likes of Vallabhai Patel, GD Birla and even Gandhi seemed to have ganged up against Netaji. Going by one quote of his in your book, “They were jealous of me”, I wonder what was the main point of difference. Was it only because of his insistence on purna swaraj as against Gandhi wanting a dominion status first?

Bose: The issue of dominion status versus purna swaraj was dissolved by the late 1920s. Subhas Chandra Bose was always a step ahead of the other leaders of the Indian National Congress. The differences that developed in the late 1930s flowed from a number of factors.

First, Subhas Chandra Bose wanted Gandhi to lead another mass movement against the British in 1939 and Gandhi kept saying that the country was not yet ready for such a movement.

Second, there were differences about the future economic reconstruction of India. Subhas Chandra Bose wanted a more modern industrial India. There were many Gandhians who took a very different view. India living in the villages and so on, even though Subhas Chandra Bose included a Gandhian, JC Kumarappa, from the National Planning Committee.

Third, he felt some Gandhians like Patel and GD Birla were prepared to make a compromise on federation with the princes and that would bring in the autocratic princes to come to balance the democratic aspirations in the British Indian provinces.

Beyond all of that he thought there was a personal dimension as well. He did have as a young leader, popular appeal and as he wrote in a private letter to Emilie Schenkl that “they are jealous of me” he kept believing that his conflict was not so much with Gandhians or Gandhi but with self-professed followers of Gandhi.

He tried his best to somehow reach an accommodation with Gandhi which he couldn’t in 1939 but I think we sometimes exaggerate the conflict between Gandhi and Bose because there was also a lot of mutual affection and respect and they certainly came close even though they never met in their ideas and strategies post-1942. After 1945, Gandhi came to genuinely admire what Netaji had achieved outside India.

Ghosh: I had the feeling that Gandhi was a bit patronising and after 1945 it was easier to be generous about Bose...
something I can entirely agree with. It may have been easier but Gandhi was the one political leader still trying desperately to preserve Hindu-Muslim unity and the unity of India. He felt that his more obedient sons of the late ‘30s, Nehru and Patel, were not supporting him. Under those circumstances Gandhi may well have genuinely felt that even what Netaji had achieved on that front with Azad Hind Fauj in Southeast Asia, his presence made a difference.

Ghosh: I wonder about Subhas Chandra Bose’s religion. Like you’ve said in your book, he talks a lot about the country as the mother but he never spoke in public about his religion...

Bose: He was actually in his private life a brave devotee of what you call the divine mother, the supreme being or God manifesting in the form of the divine mother. That is very much a part of the Bengali cultural milieu and you would find that before that escape from India he actually sent my father and a sister of his to offer puja at the Dakshineswar Kali temple. In Southeast Asia he would go to the meditation room of the Ramakrishna Mission and obviously pray or meditate and then come out feeling rejuvenated. But he never mentioned all of this in public because in his public political life his primary goal was to unite all religious communities of India. As SA Ayer, his minister of publicity, pointed out that he never spoke his God; he lived Him. He wanted to be very generous to non-Hindu minorities and even go out of his way in the public sphere so he kept his own religious faith very private.

Ghosh: A common perception among most Bengalis is that if Netaji was alive then India would probably not have faced Partition or the massacre during Partition...

Bose: As I have mentioned in the book, it is a big if of history to which there cannot be any definitive answer. I have suggested that based on the records he would have been generous to the Muslims of India and tried his best in equitable power sharing arrangement. He had, of course, met Jinnah in 1938 as president of the Congress and again in 1940 when he had fallen out with the Congress high command.

With Gandhi he also had a difference in opinion on Bengal because he felt let down that Mahatma Gandhi was listening to GD Birla and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and not to him in addressing the Bengal question. He felt that if coalition governments could be formed in the Muslim majority provinces, it would be good for the Congress. He was actually hoping for coalitions and he wanted both Hindu and Muslim communities to be represented in a power-sharing arrangement. On that basis he would have definitely wanted to negotiate a satisfactory solution.

Ghosh: The first thought that comes to mind after reading the book was Subhas Chandra Bose’s concern about the minorities and backward classes and for a change it was important to harp on these aspects than his military stance and the freedom fighter he was.

Bose: That kind of appropriation is only possible if you take a one-dimensional view of him as a hero. As soon as you look at him in his totality then what strikes you is his major emphasis in public political life was to unite the various religious communities of India and be very generous to the minorities especially the Muslims. That I think is extremely important to emphasise in contemporary India.

Ghosh: I hope that it will help dispel the many mysteries around Subhas Chandra Bose.

Metro: What kind of time was spent in researching and penning the biography?

Bose: The actual writing of the book was done over a year of sabbatical leave that I had from Harvard in the academic year 2009-2010 and I wrote the book very substantially. The only book I’ve written substantially in India, especially in Calcutta. I often wrote during the day sitting in this room (third floor office in Netaji Bhavan) and I continued to write at home at night in Calcutta but it is very hard to say how long this book took to research and write. I have actually heard stories of Netaji from the men and women who worked with him since I was a child. I have edited Netaji’s collected works with my father from 1992 onwards but I was involved with those materials from before. So I became familiar with not just his writings but archival materials about him. I actually decided that I would write the book after my previous major book The Hundred Horizons had been published in 2006. So I paid some focused attention to it in the years that followed and then the actual writing was quite fast in the year 2009-2010.

Metro: What style and approach did you decide on?

Bose: I felt that historical narrative can be as attractive as fictional narrative excepting that it is not a novel but a true story that I’m trying to narrate. I found that the life was more fascinating and important than the legend. I wanted to write a book that would demonstrate that.

Metro: Finally, a question that you’d have liked to ask Subhas Chandra Bose if you happened to meet him?
Bose: I like the 20th Century as a historical period and how I wish I had lived in that period and not now and met people like Gandhi, Tagore, Netaji.... One question that I might have asked is that when the Quit India Movement started in 1942 I notice a wistfulness in his tone that he's not in India to be part of that movement and I might have asked him, "Did you regret having come out of India?" My hunch is that he would have answered 'No' and probably said that 'I did not want to waste the warriors locked up in British prison. I had to come out and meet India's soldiers.' It's something that I'd really like to ask him because he also told Abid Hasan on the submarine when asked what was the worst fate that he could suffer. He had promptly answered, "In exile". He was either in prison or exile for most of his life and he also did a lot while he was in exile but clearly there was a yearning to return home. I would have prodded him more on this tension between exile and being at home.

What does Netaji mean to you today? Tell ttmetro@abpmail.com

Text: MOHUA DAS
Picture: Bishwarup Dutta